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READING AND WRITING STANDARD ENGLISH.

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THE PROBLEM OF HOW TO TEACH PUPILS IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS TO READ AND WRITE STANDARD ENGLISH IS DISCUSSED. THE VALUE OF ORAL LANGUAGE AS A MEANS OF ATTAINING READING AND WRITING PROFICIENCY IS SUGGESTED. SUCCESS IN THESE AREAS CAN BE ATTAINED IF (1) THE HOME LANGUAGE OF THE CHILD IS ACCEPTED, (2) THE CHILD IS OFFERED MATERIALS ON HIS LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING AS WELL AS ON HIS LEVEL OF SPEECH, (3) THE CHILD'S WRITING IS ACCEPTED ON THE BASIS OF SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION RATHER THAN ON THE BASIS OF MECHANICS, (4) THE CHILD IS IMMERSED IN ORAL SPEECH, (5) THE THOUGHT PROCESS IN SPEECH IS EXPLAINED TO HIM AS THOUGHT-ACTION AND WRITING AS AFTER-THOUGHT. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH CONFERENCE (HONOLULU, NOVEMBER 23-25, 1967). (JM)

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Reading and Writing Standard English

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Reading and Writing Standard English

For this discussion, Standard English may be described as the level of English used, while one communicates, which is correct and right for needed social, business, or literary situations which demand usage of "Prestige English." "Prestige" English is the level of language with which one may speak or write when applying for a position comparable to that of secretary to the president of a concern which requies communication in Standard English. We might say that "Standard English" is the language ability which we hope the high school graduate "takes with" him and which we wish all college freshmen had not lost.

To prevent criticism of the above paradox or anomaly, permit reemphasis of the words correct and right. To make the definition simple, we may say if the English used in speech or in writing conforms with the rules of a formal English program, or even an English textbook, then it must be Standard English.

This discussion is to consider how we may teach pupils in the elementary schools to read and write in standard English. The following points will be explored briefly:

1. The school, as well as the teacher, must accept each individual pupil as is. This definitely includes his speech-ways.

2. The teacher must understand the difficulties of verbal communication, and perceive that many children listen and/or talk with little comprehension.

3. Oral language development must be allowed to run ahead of reading development.

4. The child must be permitted to learn to read in a dialect familiar to him.

5. The method of teaching used must accept the difference basically, in the thought process of speaking and in the thought process for writing.

6. The first suggestions will be of little value unless full consideration and research ultimately is given to the process of learning. We must investigate how children learn, and particularly, how thought is related to the development of speech, to learning to read, and to growth of ability in writing.

A language arts program isn't just for one grade level. The overall program is geared to twelves years of a pupil's life assuming his parents have done their part. If a first grader speaks incorrectly to his teacher, said teacher should accept this without comment because interruption or rejection of speech may throttle future expression rather than to develop it. This does not mean that the teacher may not utilize correct speech when answering the child.

In any classroom, recitation often necessitates that the child answer a question immediately. Accepting a child implies "time to think and answer." A teacher, patient with the pupil who explores his thoughts as he tries to speak, accepts the child whether he uses excellent language, poor language, or little language. When a child points to a picture of a dog in a book and says, "S' dawg," the teacher must understand that this pupil may not know, "This is a dog," until time permits instruction of these words. The teacher also knows a negative comment at this time may hinder self-confidence as well as the need to build an image as an achiever.

Acceptance of each child has to be the <u>first</u> requirement before any successful teaching is achieved. Jersild notes how problems resulting from outright rejection may tend to develop hostility in such a manner that the child may refuse to learn to read.[1] Each child, says Jersild, needs support of friendly adults, so when his dialect pattern is foreign to his teacher, understanding, patience, and acceptance are necessary.

If we encourage the children to memorize poems, lines from plays and stories, and permit them to hear stories, to sing songs, and to participate in choral speaking, they may then make a transition from poor dialect and incorrect speech to standard English. Edwards suggests each pupil be literally immersed in speech sounds.

This week, in the Honolulu Star-Bulletin, Everts is quoted as saying that pupils need to talk and talk and talk in English in class.[2]

In the early years, the most important objective or training, says Dollard and Miller, is teaching the child to speak and think for only with the aid of language can a child learn to wait, hope, reason and plan.[3]

Many children may listen or talk with little comprehension. Simula noted four ways which may indicate a pupil's lack of listening.[4] These are as follows:

1. Directions are not followed
2. Inattentiveness
3. Forgetting
4. Poor understanding or listening "comprehension."

Simula also explains that a child with any of the above problems may really be showing a symptom of another basic problems.[4] For example, failure to follow directions may be a breach of action due to habit or to poor teaching, and inattentiveness may be a result of poor motivation.

In his studies of language and of thought of children, Piaget pointed out a listening problem.[5] He stated that when a child listens to someone else talking, his ego-centrism induces him to believe that he understands everything and prevents him from understanding word for word the terms and propositions that he hears. Thus, instead of analyzing what he hears in detail, he reasons about it as a whole. He makes no attempt to adapt himself to the other person and it is this lack of adaptation which causes him to think in general schemas. Ego-centrism may be said to be contrary, says Piaget, to analysis. The child lets all difficult words in a given phrase slip by; then he connects the familiar words into a general schema, which subsequently enables him to interpret the words not originally understood.

Frost and Hawks, in their comparison of the restricted language of some pupils with the elaborate language of others, not only substantiate the importance of listening upon oral language, but they indicate the importance of developing oral language before reading.[6]

What effect, then, does listening and oral language have on the reading of standard English? Monroe offers the thought if a child has heard and used language patterns like those in the book the child may have a basis for comprehending the materials in that book.[7] The printed text in a primer is formulated in STANDARD SPEECH, while the child's use of language, says Monroe, may be anything but standard. She points out that the child who comprehends, "Tom gotta dog," does not necessarily comprehend, "Tom has a dog." And she says, the child who says, "Whatcha gonna do?" may not immediately understand the printed words, "What are you going to do?" The suggestion has been made that children be taught both ways: at first, write the way they actually speak and eventually, teach them another word or another way of saying the same thought and then compare the writing of the first with that of the latter. The experience approach in teaching may be useful here.

Monroe also comments that dialects, foreign language, sub-standard English, and simply the fact that we usually run the sounds of spoken words together in the pattern of conversational speech, may make the printed language in a book seem as strange and devoid of meaning to some children as if they were mastering an almost new language.[7]

Whipple offers insight concerning the reading problem.[8] She stated the limitations suffered by the disadvantaged child to be those of culture rather than intelligence and said, "Children learn to read best when they can identify with the environment, the characters, and the situations presented in their readers."

Through her research in using the City Reading Series, Whipple states we must use our classrooms in new fashion.[8] Learning should be a means of developing social levers and Whipple notes that reading can be a powerful means to this end; beginning reading materials must increase language power as well as develop personalities which have not been formed.

If reading standard English depends upon oral language and listening abilities, what effect does oral language ability, if any, have upon writing standard English?

In their own way and at their own level of competence, children must be expected, says Watts, to think first and write afterwards.[9] But we must remember that too great an emphasis at too early an age on planned statements, he says, may rob their

writing of all its liveliness and interest.

Pupils will tend to write exactly as they speak; therefore we must reconsider our teaching techniques.[10] Love feels English teachers have followed unsound psychological approaches for a long time and insists we must utilize meaningful and interesting approaches and suggests the following:

1. Use an oral approach to writing.
2. When pupils do write, have them write about meaningful thoughts, things, and ideas.
3. Discuss errors in writing orally with individual students and compare these to current standard usage.

Applegate's idea of encouraging pupils to note that writing is a "two-way conversation" is worthy.[11] Functional writing often needs imagination and thought as much as does creative writing and Applegate offers the elementary teacher much help towards this goal.

Writing is different. Writing is different and hard to do because it is actually, "after-thought." When we speak, we express a thought as we "have" it. We hesitate, we change our sentence as we move along, speaking orally at the same time. It is possible to build sentences gradually as we talk. Sometimes we start a sentence, says Watts, which would be the original thought but we end upon on a different idea entirely.[9] This is possible in speech. This change of pace and hesitation is tolerated as one speaks. If we read, too, a thought is complete because it has been recorded and there it is! But now we write. We cannot just write because we have something worth saying. How many times, may we ask, have we said just this to children? Watts indicates a problem in the early stages of teaching children to write as the problem of getting those who have become fluent talkers to stop and think what they are going to say before they put pencil to paper. He notes that one must settle up with his "after-thoughts" before he writes his sentence.

Has the true problem in writing been, rather than motivation, evaluation? We cannot advocate a continuous repetition of errors in writing, but it does seem sensible to take things one-by-one. Emphasis on evaluation for each written paper may b

on the consistant error rather than on the usage of a red pencil. "Lifting" one sentence and rewriting it to show correction of the specified error may suffice.

To summarize, the following points have been implied:

1. If we accept the child as he comes to us we must respect his "home" language. We must present the new language in school exactly as another way of saying the same thing. [I feel I must caution against the "foreign language method" because the child here knows a similar language; this IS different from a language entirely foreign.

2. We must teach standard language (oral) by removing all English textbooks from the classroom and replace them with a tape recorder, a listening center, and a teacher interested in developing a program needed by the students. (Love says this very well as she comments we must study the individual pupil, note his or her habits and then be prepared to work with their regional improprieties. She also suggests we develop textbooks accompanied by tapes so that students may "hear" as well as "read."[10]

3. We must offer children materials to read which are not only on their level of understanding but on their level of speech.

4. The writing children do at first should be accepted on the basis of how successfully they communicated. Then follow with concern over the mechanics.

5. Children should be exposed to a vast amount of oral language. Immerse them in oral speech so they will understand written material offered them and eventually will then write in standard English.

6. Children should be encouraged to note that speech is "thought-action" whereas writing is "after-thought." Perhaps we must adjust our teaching to this idea.

A plethora of ideas may have been presented concerning reading and writing standard English. Emphasis has been on the basic value of oral language because the time is now demanding such emphasis. Perhaps the key question to reading and writing standard English concerns the ways teachers see children and youth--who may not be able to read or write in standard English--are they unreachable and despairing or do teachers acknowledge the immediate situation while mobilizing all resources at their command to remedy educational requirements.

And, finally, we must recognize the necessity for research in program and curriculum development with emphasis on language as it relates to the process of thought.